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ABSTRACT

From the academic--or instructivist--perspective, the young child is seen as dependent on adults' instruction in the academic knowledge and skills necessary for a good start for later academic achievement. This perspective is in direct contrast to the active and interactive curriculum assumed by proponents of the constructivist approach. This Digest considers instructivist and constructivist approaches to early childhood education and suggests that attention to children's intellectual development may inadvertently be overlooked by both sides. The Digest considers why the academic approach has grown in popularity, how to distinguish academic from intellectual goals, what research says about constructivism versus instructivism, the importance of children's intellectual development, and teaching methods that support children's intellectual development. Project work is suggested as a way that young children can express their intellectual dispositions in the pursuit of serious topics, apply their emerging and academic skills, and generate high-quality products. The Digest proposes that the early childhood curriculum be structured so that it is focused on at least a trio of goals: (1) social/emotional development; (2) intellectual development; and (3) the acquisition of meaningful and useful academic skills. (Contains 14 references.) (LPP)

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Curriculum Disputes in Early Childhood Education

Lilian G. Katz

Disputes concerning curriculum and teaching methods go back a long way in the field of early childhood education. Over the years, many different terms have been used to capture the opposing positions. In recent years, the term *academic* has come to describe those parts of the early childhood curriculum intended to help children master the basic skills involved in literacy and numeracy (Jacobson, 1996). From the academic—or instructivist—perspective, the young child is seen as dependent on adults' instruction in the academic knowledge and skills necessary for a good start for later academic achievement (see Katz, 1996).

This perspective is in direct contrast to the active and interactive curriculum assumed by proponents of the constructivist approach, who see young children as active constructors of knowledge; a major goal of a constructivist curriculum, then, is to provide ample opportunity for active construction of knowledge. This Digest considers instructivist and constructivist approaches to early childhood education and suggests that attention to children's intellectual development may inadvertently be overlooked by both sides. The main thesis here is that just because children are not engaged in formal academic instruction does not mean that what they are doing is sufficient to support their *intellectual* development.

Why Has the Academic Approach Grown in Popularity?

Several factors may account for increasing pressure to introduce children to academics (e.g., in literacy and numeracy skills) as early as the preschool and kindergarten years.

One factor is the increasing demand and widening expectation that preschool and kindergarten programs ensure children's readiness for the next grade or class level. This phenomenon is part of a traditional tendency at every level of education to push down curriculum expectations from older to younger children.

Another factor may be that the traditional importance given to spontaneous play as young children's natural way to learn may seem less urgent today than a half a century ago when, for most children, opportunities and artifacts for play were less plentiful than today, especially in the home.

Much of the current contentiousness between the "instructivists" and "constructivists" revolves around the extent to which formal academic instruction may be appropriate or even essential for those young children whose early environments may not provide sufficient experiences for spontaneous informal learning of basics such as the alphabet and the names of colors and shapes.

On the constructivist side, it is assumed that child-initiated exploration, well "scaffolded" by adults, is the developmentally appropriate way to support children's learning. By contrast, those favoring a large component of formal instruction in basic academic skills put children in a passive-receptive role of internalizing the transmitted knowledge and systematically practicing the literacy and numeracy skills to be learned.

It is useful to keep in mind that today most classes offer some mix or blend of these two positions.

How Can We Distinguish Academic from Intellectual Goals?

Academic tasks are typically carefully structured, sequenced, and decontextualized small bits of information that often require some small group or individual instruction by a knowledgeable adult. They include exercises designed to help achieve mastery of tasks. The academic tasks in the early childhood curriculum usually address facts and skills that the majority of children are unlikely to learn spontaneously or by discovery, although under favorable conditions, many children do so. These tasks frequently involve memorizing lists or symbols, responding to questions that have correct answers, and practicing routine tasks that can be assessed as right or wrong.

Intellectual goals, on the other hand, address *dispositions*, that is, habits of mind that include a variety of tendencies to interpret experience (Katz, 1993). The intellectual dispositions include the dispositions to make sense of experience, to theorize about causes and effects, to hypothesize explanations to account for observations, and to analyze and synthesize whatever information is available. These dispositions can be seen when children are engaged in investigations of things around them in the course of which they persist in seeking answers to their questions and solutions to the problems they encounter. Examples of these intellectual dispositions are shown vividly in Beneke's (1998) report of a preschool car project and in the "Shoe & Meter" project of the children in Reggio Emilia (Reggio Children, 1997).

Does Research Favor Constructivism or Instructivism?

More than half a century ago, Dorothy Gardner (1942) attempted to put to rest once and for all a similar controversy raging at that time about curriculum and teaching methods by conducting a comparative study of two nursery schools. School A was characterized by what would be called today "developmentally appropriate practice," emphasizing creativity and spontaneous play. School B was characterized by formal teacher-directed activities, now commonly referred to as "academic" in focus. Despite Gardner's findings in favor of School A, the debate over curriculum and methods resumed barely a generation later.

In the past 20 years, similar comparative studies have been reported (see, for example, Consortium for Longitudinal

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Studies, 1983; Schweinhart, Barnes, & Weikart, 1993; Schweinhart & Weikart, 1997; Marcon, 1992, 1995). The results of these studies have been somewhat mixed, though generally close to Gardner's earlier findings that those children enrolled in preschools on the constructivist side of the dichotomy fare better in school *in the long run*—especially the boys (Miller & Bizzell, 1983; Marcon, 1992). Longitudinal studies comparing "instructivist" and "constructivist" approaches suggest that the early gains of children in the "instructivist" preschool curricula do not last more than a year or two.

What about Children's Intellectual Development?

One of the major concerns about this historical squabbling over goals and methods is that both sides in the struggle may overlook curriculum and teaching methods beyond the traditional dichotomy. Years of experience of observing early childhood classrooms suggest that both sides underemphasize and undervalue a third option—namely, curriculum and teaching methods that address children's *intellectual* development as distinct from the instructivist emphasis on *academic* learning and the *constructivist* emphasis on children's play and self-initiated learning.

Constructivist theory does not neglect children's intellectual development; however, constructivist theory is sometimes misinterpreted. Believing that children "construct their own knowledge," some adults do little more than set out a variety of activities that children enjoy, while studiously avoiding formal instruction in basic academic skills. Indeed, it is not surprising that observers of nonacademic preschool and kindergarten classes who have little knowledge of young children (e.g., E. D. Hirsch, Jr.) criticize "progressive" and "constructivist" classes as banal, vacuous, overemphasizing play and fun, and wasteful of children's capacities.

At the same time, a strong academic approach may undermine the disposition to use the knowledge and skills so intensely instructed. The disposition to be readers or, similarly, to be ready users of mathematical concepts and skills often painfully acquired may be damaged by premature instruction, given the amount of drill and practice usually required for success in mastering these skills at an early age.

What Teaching Methods Support Children's Intellectual Development?

An appropriate curriculum addresses strengthening and using the intellectual dispositions, offers good processes about rich content, and results in high-quality products. For these reasons, many teachers have been incorporating project work into the curriculum (Katz & Chard, 1989; Beneke, 1998). Project work not only provides contexts for the intellectual dispositions involved in the investigations that children undertake, but it also provides texts and pretexts for children to make meaningful and functional *use* of the academic skills they are taught during the "instructive" part of the curriculum. Thus, we might "trichotomize" the early childhood curriculum so that it is focused on at least a trio of goals: (1) social/emotional development *and* (2) intellectual development *and* (3) the acquisition of meaningful and useful academic skills.

Excellent examples of meaningful long-term projects in which children's intellects as well as growing academic skills flourish can be seen in the work of the children in the preprimary schools in Reggio Emilia, Italy (Reggio Children, 1997), as well as in reports of projects by Beneke (1998) and Helm (1998). These works demonstrate that young children can express their intellectual dispositions in the pursuit of serious topics *and* apply their emerging and academic skills *and* generate high-quality products simultaneously.

For More Information

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